

EDITORIAL

LIBERAL TOLERANCE,  
CIVILIZATION,  
AND PROGRESS

One of the leading ideas guiding the editorial policy of *Redescriptions* is to bring out points of connection between critical conceptual history and contemporary political thought. This policy is informed by an awareness of the power that history writing exerts on giving shape to the past and the present, along with the power of individual concepts and conceptual clusters to shape reality. The focus of *Redescriptions* is in finding out how concepts work.

The articles in this volume span a continuum of concepts operating at the core of liberal political thought, concepts such as liberal, tolerance, progress, civilization, civilized, civility, civil society, civic, and *citizen*. They are all approached in a way which opens up their contingent past and their various effects in the present.

In her article 'Tolerance as/in Civilizational Discourse' Wendy Brown takes up the performative aspects of *tolerance*. Brown fittingly places the concept in a contemporary context of war against terrorism, international politics and globalization. The war against terrorism is too often understood as a war against barbarism, and tolerance, one of the central concepts of liberal discourse, acts as an agent in this war.

Brown's trenchant inquiry into the concept of tolerance highlights its operation in the service of the hegemonic. Tolerance is generally an act of those who are in a hegemonic position towards those who deviate from the hegemonic norms, and as she points out, as an act it hides the power organizing the very performance. According to Brown, in contemporary political context the discourse of tolerance operates by situating once more the West in the center and as the standard of civilization, which sanctions cultural domination. The rhetoric of "teaching tolerance" de-politicizes the effects of domination and colonialism.

Tolerance was also a central characteristic in the traditional pre-political meaning of *liberal* as a social attribute of an educated gentleman. As Jörn Leonhard explains in his article on the semantics of liberalism in European comparison, *liberal* had originally no direct political meaning but it was instead an attitude belonging to an aristocratic and cultivated political and social elite. As Leonhard's discussion of the concept *liberal* demonstrates, conceptual history at its best can open up the politically unsettled field that in a given historical situation has access to a variety of possible futures, yet as the discursive actions evolve, those meanings become pre-empted by and closed off to certain directions. Leonhard's article displays such a moment, or a series of moments, through which the concept *liberal* became attached to a specifically political meaning.

Conceptual history is employed also by Henrik Stenius in his article on the concept *citizen* which in the Finnish context exemplifies another moment of a highly open field of possibilities in the past. Stenius focuses on a crucial moment in a period of post-Napoleonic Finland, and on a single influential text by the Finnish scholar and advocate of a nationalist movement Elias Lönnrot (1802-84). Looking closely into the translation of the concept *citizen* from Swedish into Finnish Stenius is able to show how Lönnrot conceived the then central new concept of European political thought in a most imaginative way. According to Stenius, Lönnrot introduced a radically universalistic concept of citizen, which was only made possible through the presently current translation culture of Finland.

The relevance of the past to the present and the limits of tolerance and civilization similarly concern Tuija Parvikko in her article on writing the history of the Holocaust and on memory as politics. She

argues that the temptation to view the Holocaust as an event that is beyond representation should be avoided. She discusses the problem of representing, witnessing, and the politics of memory in Germany concerning the Holocaust. Along with Arendt she argues that remembering is important for the sake of the possibility of political existence that renders human life meaningful.

The effects of the discourse of *civility*, *civilization*, and *civil society*, and *progress* on contemporary politics are addressed by Kimberley Hutchings in her contribution to this volume. Hutchings critically examines the notions of *global civil society* which have in recent years been put forward in various post-Kantian and post-Marxist terms by authors such as Hardt and Negri, Linklater and Kaldor. Hutchings is able to show how the figure of progress in history persistently adheres to discussions on civil society in international context. She pinpoints the problem to a unifying idea of progress which is posited as universal and therefore able to de-historicize and de-politicise its own particular historicity and politics. Hutchings encourages theorists of world politics to a greater degree of self-consciousness concerning the origins and political effects – both intended and unintentional – of those vocabularies in which their analysis is conducted.

The articles of Brown and Hutchings in this volume provide exemplary critical perspectives on how particular vocabularies carry their histories to the present and perform in contemporary usage in ways that are not always at all evident. Through its semantic history well-mannered tolerance is made to reveal its more dubious aspect as an attitude organized in terms of a hierarchy of the privileged and the non-privileged. The positive echo of progress thinly covers the idea of placing civilizations in hierarchies, conditioned by cultural power and colonial legacies. Both analyses point to a situation where the limits of liberal discourse become all too apparent when considered together with various histories of dominance.

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